

**THE THIRTY-SECOND WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
NEVER-ENDING JOY 2023**

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Sunday

THE FEAST OF UNENDING JOY

Recollection by a Monk of Mepkin

In November of 1949, twenty-nine monks from Gethsemani Abbey arrived at Mepkin to found the Monastery of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Fifteen were novices, supposedly flexible enough to adapt to the hardships that go with founding a new community. An ancient motto to help us along the path to God says: “Through hardships, to Heaven!” Monastic life provides the hardships and God provides the grace to bear with them and persevere. Brother Boniface summed up the challenge and the grace by pointing to two of Mepkin’s huge live oaks: “Those great big oak trees were once just little nuts that held their ground!” Monks are nuts for Christ putting down roots into monastic life and persevering until death, as St. Benedict says, they show the Church and the world the inner beauty that grows in one who walks the monastic way with Jesus. It is a matter of seeking the face of God in prayer, work, and community living. Only 10 of the 29 founders persevered to be buried at Mepkin.

All Christians are called to pray, to work, and to live in a community of mutual love, and monks seek to do this in the most thorough way possible. It is hard. Everything begins and ends with prayer—no matter how hot the summer heat or how hard the drudgery of turning what contained only a summer home into a property able to feed and clothe an entire community. Trappist tradition insists that monks support themselves by the work of their own hands. It took many experiments for the community to find success in raising chickens for their eggs, and then mushrooms.

This makes it difficult not to let prayer slip from the center of who you are and what you do. Besides, you live in silence and a kind of solitude; you rise early so you can get prayer and meditation in before the day’s work begins. Many of our human ways of finding encouragement and support are deliberately given up in monastic life. A monastery is a kind of half-open door through which one can glimpse the life and joy of the Kingdom of God. The name ‘mepkin’ is said to mean “beautiful place”. To translate natural into spiritual beauty it is important to have a beautiful church and liturgy. The monastery became the “Abbey of Our Lady of Mepkin”—Our Lady of the Beautiful Place—to show that beauty leads to joy. The present award-winning church was dedicated in 1993 with this in mind.

Mepkin Plantation didn’t put prayer first but focused on work, done by slaves. Monks work to become wholly free and make the fruit of their work a free gift to others. It is a life of turning from all that enslaves people and leads them away from the love of God and loving respect for others. This is the path to God’s Kingdom and unending joy. The twin blessings that are the Mepkin community and its church remind all of God’s call to live now the life of charity that will last forever. Those who have gone into glory remind us who remain to keep death, and God, daily before our eyes. We show that we too can share God’s unending joy. The special thing our founders did was love one another in God for an entire lifetime. Deeper than hardships, and even sin, is the joy given us in Christ. It shapes each monk’s life as a witness for all to see and an invitation to follow Jesus. It is a response to the call that is faith and our call to celebrate on earth the Day of Unending Joy.

Monday

CELEBRATING THE SAINTS OF THE BENEDICTINE ORDER

A Reflection by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

We often celebrate feast days in honor of saints. These celebrations mustn't be without fruit. They don't benefit those we honor, so the benefit must be ours. If (e.g.) we live our life badly the celebration awakens shame and even fear. If we are weak, do we let the desire for what is only of this earth drive us? If so, how do you react to hearing about St. Benedict's struggles, and how he cast himself into a thorn bush rather than give in to sin? Why should he be able to do what you can't, and even as a young man? Do you remember, then, what it means to walk in the Spirit—not your own spirit but the Holy Spirit? The Spirit creates good desires to overpower those of the flesh. Listen to what St. Paul says: "*The fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy, and peace*". By the Holy Spirit, we desire charity, chastity, peace, and so on, and by the flesh, we desire fornication, uncleanness, and other like evils. Who hasn't felt both sorts of desires within?

If we follow the counsels and desires of the Spirit then we walk in the Spirit.

The flesh counsels us to seek fine foods and eat to satiation; it counsels us to seek more sleep, warmer blankets, and softer clothing. The Spirit counsels us never to be lazy or wander about, not to talk a lot but to move always toward good works like seriousness, love of silence and inner quietness, to spurn gossip, merely hanging around with people, and to prefer to mortify ourselves by vigils, by abstinence, manual labor, prayers, compunction, devotion, and the like.

Today we celebrate a vast crowd of those who have walked in the Spirit and even now pray for us to walk in the Spirit as well. By remembering, and by celebrating, these holy ones we are aroused to the warmth of charity. Looking to them we can make progress first in hope and then in love. If you visualize yourself doing what these saints did you begin to long to make progress by means of such spiritual exercises as I have described.

What St. Benedict did he taught to others, and they are teaching us right now. The Holy Spirit instituted the Rule through St. Benedict and so its counsels are those of the Holy Spirit for us. Think of how many dangers we avoid by following these teachings. See how useful that is for celebrating today's feast. It takes away every excuse for not living them and shows us how they can lead us to love for God and for one another. To see you living these counsels will enkindle hope in many others.

We are like pieces of wood on an altar waiting to be burnt up in sacrifice. The fire that will make the sacrifice complete is love. Let us take that fire to our wood. There is a certain fire we call tribulation but it is not as great as that of love. Both cleanse us and destroy what is bad and imperfect in us. All these saints we now remember were cleansed in this way. If we too want to be cleansed then we must submit patiently to the fire of tribulation and ask God to help us burn as hot as we can with the fire of love. The fire of tribulation is a beginning and the fire of love is perfection. Listen to St. Paul: "*Tribulation works to produce patience, patience enables us to undergo testing, and testing brings us hope. Hope will never be discredited because the charity of God is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit*".

Tuesday

IN THE SURE HANDS OF GOD

From the Morning Meditation of Pope Francis, 12 November 2013

In God's hands, we find our true security. They are hands wounded by love, and they guide us along the path of life. This was the heart of the homily Pope Francis delivered during the Holy Mass he celebrated at the Chapel of Santa Marta.

The Holy Father commented on the first Reading of the day, taken from the Book of Wisdom (2:23-3:9), which states that "God created man for incorruption and made him in the image of his own eternity". "He made us and he is our Father," Pope Francis said. "He made us beautiful as he is beautiful, more beautiful than the angels, greater than the angels".

The devil envied the greatness and beauty of God's rational creature, and "through the devil's envy, death entered the world". The devil "could not endure that man be superior to him, that man and woman be made in the image and likeness of God. This is why he made war on them" and laid before them "a road that leads to death".

And yet "the Lord does not abandon the work of his hands," the Pope observed. As Wisdom says, "The souls of the just are in the hands of God". The Pope continued: "We all have to pass through death. Yet it is one thing to pass through this in the hands of the devil, and quite another to pass through it in the hands of God".

"I love to listen to these words: we are in the hands of God. And this was so from the very beginning. The Bible uses a beautiful image to explain our creation: God, who with his hands forms us out of mud, out of the clay of the earth, into his image and likeness. It was God's hands that fashioned us: God the artist".

And therefore, God does not abandon us. God, Pope Francis said, acts "like a father with his child and takes him by the hand. God's hands accompany us on our journey". The Father "teaches us how to walk, how to travel on the road of life and salvation". And our Father caresses us, he loves us so much. And oftentimes in these caresses we also find forgiveness".

"It does us great good to think: Jesus, God still bears his wounds. He shows them to the Father. This is the price: the hands of God are hands pierced by love. And this brings us great comfort. How many times have we heard it said: I don't know who to trust, all the doors are closed, I shall entrust myself to the hands of God! And this is beautiful because it is there that we rest secure".

Pope Francis concluded: "Let us think about the hands of God, who fashioned us as an artist. He has given us eternal life. They are pierced hands. They accompany us along the path of life. Let us entrust ourselves to the hands of God as a child entrusts himself to his father".

Wednesday

HEALING THE LEPROSY OF SIN

A Reflection from a Gospel commentary by St. Bruno of Segni

On his way to Jerusalem, on his way to offer his life for the salvation of all, Jesus was encountered by ten lepers. What do these lepers stand for? They stand for all sinners! When Christ the Lord came not everyone was a leper in body, but all were leprous in their soul. It is much worse to have a leprous soul than a leprous body.

Standing a long way off, they called out: Jesus, Master, have pity on us! They stand a long way off because no one in their condition dared to come close to God or enter God's presence. We stand far off if we continue to sin. So we too must cry out: Jesus, Master, have pity on me. That cry must come from the heart. It cries so loudly it pierces the heavens and rises to the very throne of God.

So when Jesus saw the lepers he told them to go and show themselves to a priest. God has only to look at us to be filled with compassion. Jesus pitied those lepers as soon as he saw them. The priest was not to cleanse them but to pronounce them clean.

As they obeyed Jesus, they were cleansed. Let all sinners listen to this and try to understand. It is easy for the Lord to forgive sins. Sinners are often forgiven before they come to a priest. Repentance and healing occur simultaneously. At the very instance of conversion, a person passes from death to life. But we have to struggle to understand what conversion then requires. We must heed the Lord's words: "Return with all your heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning, and don't tear your clothing but break open your heart". To be really converted one must be so inwardly.

God will not spurn a humbled and contrite heart. One of the ten saw he was cured and went back praising God. This Samaritan stands for all those who, after being cleansed by the waters of baptism or healed by the sacrament of penance, renounce the devil and take Christ as their model. They follow him with praise, adoration and thanksgiving.

Jesus said to this person: Stand up and go your way; your faith has saved you. Great is the power of faith! Without it, as St. Paul says, it is impossible to please God. Faith saves. Faith justifies. Faith heals both body and soul. St. Paul gives us the example of Abraham. He believed in God's promise, and so was righteous before God. What has God promised you? What have you asked for? If God asked you this question could you reply: I want only you, Lord.

Thursday

SEEKING GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART

A Reflection from Spiritual Exercises by St. Gertrude the Great

O My Love, what fulfillment to be one with You. The joining of the Word and a soul is the most worthy and marvelous of all unions. It achieves perfect union with God. It is a way of being intertwined with God. To enjoy you, O Word of God is to be one with God.

You, Lord, are the peace that surpasses all understanding. You are the road by which a person comes into the inner chamber, the bridal chamber. Oh, if only someone like me, someone who seems so miserable as I do, could rest just for a moment wrapped in your cloak, as Ruth was in that of Boaz. Yours is a cloak of cherishing love. You wrap us in it so our hearts might become bold beyond measure in your love.

What a consolation it would be to hear one word from you, a word of your Living Word. Oh! that I might hear from you the good and wondrously pleasant word: I am your salvation! Behold, now the bedchamber of my heart is open to you!

Don't let me be disappointed in what I hope for. Grant that I may find rest for my soul in you! I know of nothing that is more desirable than you! I can't think of anything that is more lovable than your embrace. I want to rest under the wings of my Jesus! I want to dwell and abide in the tent that is your divine love.

Oh, love! O radiant noonday of love! I would die a thousand deaths to be able to rest in you in this way. Please, bend down, look down, and bring your wonderful face close to me. Oh, give me the experience of your cherishing love. You are indeed my dearest one.

Grant me to come so close to you that nothing closer is possible. I don't want just to be near to you but to be within you. Then all sorts of virtues and spiritual flowers could spring up in me, for you are the Sun of Justice. Even though I am only dust and ashes, where you are every sort of life springs up and abounds.

If you are my spouse, my Lord, what fruitfulness would enter my soul? Oh that I might bear the offspring of total perfection! Grant that it be born in me! Then, indeed, I would be snatched out of this valley of misery! Then I would be able to glory in you forever. I would be right there in front of your so marvelous face!

Grant that I may glory in you forever! You are a mirror without defect and you haven't scorned to be united with a sinner like me! Let me be wholly yours!

Friday

BEAUTY GREAT AND SMALL

From the Morning Meditation of Pope Francis, 13 November 2015

“Never fall into the idolatry of immanence and of habits” and “always aim beyond”. From immanence look to transcendence and from habits look to the ultimate habits, which will be contemplating the glory of God”, with the certainty that if “life is beautiful, the sunset will also be beautiful”. Pope Francis advised against falling into idolatry, during his homily at the Mass he celebrated on Friday morning, in the Chapel of Casa Santa Marta.

The Pope was inspired by Psalm 18 from the day’s Liturgy. In that prayer, he said, “we repeated: ‘The heavens declare the glory of God’: his glory, his beauty, the only beauty that remains forever”.

The Readings, one from the Book of Wisdom (13:1-9) and one from the Gospel (Lk 17:26-37), speak to us of human glories, rather than idolatry”. In particular, the Pope noted, “The First Reading speaks of the beauty of creation: it is beautiful! God made beautiful things!”. But it immediately “points out an error, the mistake of those people who, amidst these beautiful things, were not able to look beyond them, namely, to transcendence”. Yes, there are certainly things that are “good in themselves, they have their autonomy of beauty in this case”. These men “did not recognize that this beauty is a sign of another greater beauty that awaits us”. This is the beauty referred to in Psalm 18: “The heavens declare the glory of God”. It is “the beauty of God”.

However, we read in the Book of Wisdom that these men were “fascinated” by the beauty of the “things God created”, and came to take them as “gods”. This is precisely the “idolatry of immanence”, the pope said. They basically thought that “there is nothing beyond these things, and that these things are so beautiful that they are gods”. In this way “they were attached to this idolatry; they were awestruck by their power and energy”, instead of thinking of “what is greater, their sovereign, that the One who made them is the source and author of beauty”.

“It is idolatry to view vast beauty without thinking that there will be a sunset”, the Pope remarked, noting however that “even the sunset has its own beauty”. We all face “the danger” of falling into “this idolatry of being attached to the beautiful things here, without transcendence”. Pope Francis explained that “the idolatry of immanence is when we believe that things are almost as gods the way they are, and that they will never end”. And “we forget about the sunset”, he said.

“The other idolatry is the idolatry of habits”, the Pope said. In today’s Gospel passage, “Jesus, speaking of the last day, precisely of the sunset, said: ‘As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the days of the Son of Man: they ate, drank, took wives, took husbands until the day Noah entered the ark’”. In short, “everything is habitual, life is this way: we live accordingly, without thinking about the sunset of this way of living”.

Yet “this too is idolatry: being attached to routine, without thinking that it will end”. And “the Church makes us look to the end of these things”. Therefore, “even habits can be thought of as gods”. In this way “idolatry” consists in thinking that “life is like this” and continuing forward out of habit. “As beauty will end in another beauty, our routine will end in eternity, in another routine, but God is there!”.

Saturday

THE KINGDOM SUFFERS VIOLENCE

From EVANGELIZATION WITH MARY by Rev. Johann G. Roten

The life of Mary and her role in evangelization tells us that the kingdom suffers violence. Evangelization does not happen without a good fight. The kingdom of God suffers violence. It would be foolish to believe that evangelization doesn't know any enemies, that it goes unnoticed and unopposed by the devil who sits in many places, but who also sits in the detail.

Scripture takes the existence and influence of the devil very seriously. We find various indications of his influence on human beings and the disposition of their minds and bodies. In Scripture, Satan is called the prince of this world (Jn 12,31), and even the God of this world (2 Cor 4;4). Very frequently, he is designated by the name devil which means "to cause destruction, to divide, to calumniate, to deceive." Scripture mentions angels 148 times in the Old Testament, and 74 times in the New Testament. The two testaments mention the devils 115 times and Satan 33 times.

The devil is a master of deception—among other things—because he so beautifully blends in with ordinary human reality. If the devil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own likeness, remarked Dostoyevsky. The devil is a gentleman, for Shakespeare as well as for Shelley. For Luther, he is God's ape: "For where God built a church, there the devil would also build a chapel." Worse still: "If God sends meat, the devil sends cooks." Across the board, the devil seems to have all the good tunes. He knows all the tricks in the book.

Indeed, the devil is very much a part of the tapestry of our daily life, skillfully exploiting the natural course of things, the petty shortcomings as well as many of our innocent pleasures. In particular, the devil sits in the detail as we know and merrily exploits the three F's: forgetfulness, forgiveness, and fear.

1. The devil gets to us through forgetfulness. There is an old saying: "When the devil was sick, the devil a monk would be; when the devil got well, the devil a monk was he." This old maxim says in effect that, when we are sick or in some danger, we make pious resolutions but forget them as soon as the danger is past.

2. The devil gets to us through our reluctance and seeming impossibility to forgive.

... our true enemies are not those who hate us, but those whom we hate.

3. The devil gets to us through our fearfulness and cowardice.

...It is too much fear and too much comfort which are the real enemies of the spirit and the secret friends of the devil. The life of the Spirit is slowly smothered to death by excessive fear and excessive ease.

We expect to do battle with the Prince of Darkness and to heroically vanquish the huge red dragon. We sharpen our knives and encourage ourselves to be on the ready. Meanwhile, the huge red dragon has become a nasty little rat and busily eats away at the nerve ends of our lifeline with God. The devil sits in the detail, a perfect gentleman, building chapels and sending forth cooks. Let us not be spiritually naive. God will set us free from the power of darkness, but only if we remain wide awake, avoiding fear and forgetfulness, clinging to that Spirit who is now at work in each one of us, and fixing our gaze on the powerful Woman who knows and combats the strategies of evil.